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ABSTRACT

In a review of the literature regarding the current and projected status of public relations degree programs and major trends in public relations practice in the United States, this paper analyzes aspects of the political/economic/social/cultural environment (PESCE) affecting the practice and teaching of public relations. The paper covers PESCE implications for the education of future public relation practitioners, and offers specific recommendations concerning the development of effective public relations degree programs. It notes that the recommendations are responsive to PESCE trends, major developments in the practice of public relations, employment requirements in the field, and maturation of public relations as an academic discipline. (CRH)

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PUBLIC RELATIONS EDUCATION

FOR THE 80'S AND BEYOND

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the literature regarding the current and projected status of public relations degree programs and major trends in public relations practice. Aspects of the political/economic/social/cultural environment ("PESCE") affecting the field are analyzed, along with their implications for the education of future public relations practitioners. Based upon the discussion of related literature, the authors offer specific recommendations as important to the development of effective public relations degree programs for the future. These recommendations are responsive to "PESCE" trends, major developments in the practice of public relations, employment requirements in the field, and maturation of public relations as an academic discipline.

PUBLIC RELATIONS EDUCATION FOR THE 80'S AND BEYOND

The field of public relations is a relatively youthful area of communication study which has only recently begun to receive the recognition it deserves from students, employers, and academicians -- spurring PR curriculum development and review on campuses nationwide. Undergoing a great transition in focus over the past two decades, the public relations field of today offers a host of employment options. We now must ask ourselves, in view of the recent dynamic growth of this communication career area and its resulting popularity with students, whether the specific academic PR programs offered are truly applicable to today's and tomorrow's job markets.[1]

We must also consider the legitimacy -- both real and perceived -- of the public relations degree, and what we can do to enhance that legitimacy. Historically, new academic fields of study have tended to be fostered by "mother" curricula, eventually maturing to establish their own bona fide disciplines. Thus it was that speech communication emerged from rhetoric, journalism emerged from English, counseling and guidance emerged from psychology, and human resources development emerged from a multiplicity of disciplines including business, education, sociology, psychology, and communication. Thus it is that public relations is emerging from under the protective wing of its "mother"

discipline -- journalism.

Twenty years ago, fewer than a dozen public relations degrees existed in this nation -- most of them comprised of one or two PR courses worked into what was otherwise a journalism degree. Today, there are hundreds of public relations majors available on U.S. campuses -- some of them comprehensive, self-contained degree programs which frequently cross the academic lines of various disciplines such as graphics, speech communication, business, mass communication, sociology, and psychology.[3]

Such academic growth, along with national economic, political, cultural, social, and resulting organizational developments, must be carefully considered during public relations curriculum planning. The major trends which have surfaced and continue to develop in regard to the fledgling discipline point the way for progressive curriculum planning for this and future decades.

ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL TRENDS

It seems logical that corporate public relations allocations and personnel needs will continue to grow in the 1980's.[3] As Cantor recently stated, "Top management is now recognizing the need for strong internal public relations staffing, and sees this as a necessity rather than a luxury. Budgets will be expanding, as will accountability."[4]

Bureau of Labor Statistics' figures are indicative of this expansion trend, predicting a 27-32 percent increase in

the number of public relations specialists by 1995. Strong growth by 1995 is also anticipated in various occupation areas closely allied with public relations, including: 25-27 percent increase in commercial and graphic artists and designers, 34-38 percent increase in writers and editors, 38-44 percent increase in designers, 23-27 percent increase in personnel and labor relations specialists, 17-24 percent increase in community organization workers, and 25-31 percent increase in technical sales representatives (such as account executives).[5]

Lindenmann and Lapetina summarized management attitudes toward hiring top-level public relations counsel in the 1980's as positive, seeing ". . . an end to PR people being the 'last hired and first fired.' They [PR practitioners] will become an integral part of day-to-day affairs as corporations attempt to deal with the growing pressures placed on business."[6] Those pressures frequently encompass local, national, and international factors.

Our international political environment has been largely shaped by the rapid progress of communication science over the past decade. Accompanying the theoretical and technological advancements has been a trend toward corporate expansion beyond the traditional national boundaries, adding to predictions like Cantor's that "international public relations will continue to increase in importance."[7] Demands in the public relations practice for more comprehensive perspectives and training have resulted, as exemplified by

the efforts of such groups as the International Public Relations Association (IPRA).[8]

By nature, politics and economics are integrally fused. What affects one affects the other. And what affects our economic and political environments affects the field of communication and society in general. This concept has received increasing attention from public relations practitioners, even prompting the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) to devote an entire issue of its journal to "Managing Change: Social/Economic/Political."[9]

CULTURAL AND SOCIAL TRENDS

> Public relations, like engineering, medicine, architecture and other professions, is changing rapidly and responding as the world becomes more complex, as society grows more sophisticated, and as science and technology become more complicated.
>
> Kalman B. Druck, A.P.R., and Kay E. Hiebert, A.P.R.[10]

The rapid societal and cultural changes faced by Western civilization in this and future decades necessitate added emphasis on such administrative PR challenges as issues identification, planning, management, and evaluation.[11] "Public relations establishes an early warning system to alert management to controversial areas of corporate concern -- or 'environmental scanning.'"[12] Aggressive corporate response, in the form of advocacy advertising as well as oral and written publicity efforts, is increasing in popularity as this trend toward "environmental scanning" gains momentum. A typical case includes the ongoing proac-

tive stance of Mobil Oil Corporation in response to what it perceives as inaccurate and unfair media coverage.[13]

Other concerns formerly not considered essential aspects of public relations (such as human relations, employee communication, training and development, lobbying, etc.) are also gaining importance. In general, ". . . management is feeling the force of sophisticated consumers, government regulation, competition, internal corporate needs and employee demands."[14]

ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

The new political/economic/social/cultural environment ("PESCE") illustrates the need for public relations generalists as opposed to specialists.[15] No longer is "publicity" synonymous with "public relations." "Thus, for the traditional news disseminator, the job is generating messages to meet assigned objectives. For the new public relations professional, communication is more a means and less an end."[16] Many diverse services are now demanded, necessitating public relations generalists with skills in: public speaking, effective listening, media relations, business management, research techniques and interpretation, fund raising, issue and conflict resolution, social and political science, marketing, public affairs, decision making, two-way communication, graphics, employee relations, investor relations, lobbying, etcetera.[17] As Marshall explained the role of public relations generalists:[18]

> . . . the key to success is the ability to assume the characteristics of a chameleon and to reflect change as it happens. And with active and interactive communications being such an integral part of the future, the horizon for the talented communications executive is virtually unlimited.

We are seeing a continual "broadening of the intellectual substance" of the PR field.[19] Naturally, the individuals best prepared to supply the multitude of talents and skills now demanded of public relations practitioners will more easily succeed in the environment of the new "PESCE." Regarding reasons why organizations prefer to hire generalists, Marshall stated:[20]

> . . . other factors are becoming increasingly important, such as effective personal presentation, good managerial ability, business acumen, higher-than-average intelligence, sound judgment, fresh thinking, imagination, creative ideas -- and the ability to negotiate and make these ideas happen -- high tolerance for frustration, flexibility and resiliency, corporate political sensitivity, and a disarming sense of humor.

Application of Riggs' "environmental scanning" to the career field of PR focuses attention upon another major development of critical importance to public relations futurists. Economic survival dictates that public relations practitioners and advertising practitioners cannot afford separatist attitudes. As Haynes quoted George Arnold, president of KCBN Advertising & Public Relations in Dallas:[21]

> Far too many PR people adopt a purist, elitist attitude toward advertising, considering shallowly that, if you pay for it, you are somehow fostering prostitution. These uninformed PR people - and there are far, far too many of them -- are well-trained communicators, but dreadfully poor economists. They fail to understand, or often even attempt to understand, the tremendously

> positive impact advertising expenditures have on our controlled, free-enterprise economy. . .
>
> On the other hand, there are just as many talented people with a chip on their collective shoulders about public relations and PR practitioners. They look on PR and PR people as witch doctors in P. T. Barnum clothing who practice black magic and somehow mesmerize management into believing they and their actions are worthwhile. They're influence peddlers. Panhandlers who don't believe in paying their dues, but go through life begging their way to respectability. Besides, they are an overt threat to the jobs and livelihood of advertising people, who make their livings by spending other people's money. And these soft-shoe, PR tricksters are saying, "We can get it for you free. Don't advertise."

Organizations have objectively evaluated these opposing viewpoints, especially in light of the "PESCE" trends previously discussed. Their conclusion is: Paying two argumentative factions for services which can be -- and increasingly are -- available from one comprehensive entity is not cost effective. After all, "advertising is often used as a 'tool' in public relations; publicity and other public relations-like practices are utilized frequently in marketing and advertising programs."[22] Massive buyouts of major public relations firms by high-profile advertising agencies are responsive to these issues.[23] Therefore, we need more than just public relations generalists. We need public relations and advertising generalists.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS EDUCATION

Obviously, the overwhelming consensus that public relations and advertising generalists are essential to our field holds strong implications for public relations education.

"Yet our profession [public relations] has been relatively slow in developing a standardized approach for keeping up with an evolving world."[24] By and large, public relations education has been even slower.[25]

In a survey funded by the Foundation for Public Relations Research and Education, and administered at the 33rd national conference of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) in 1980, "there was 92.2% agreement overall by the 245 practitioners and educators responding to the statement: 'Changes and improvements are needed in public relations education in the 1980's to meet the needs of the profession.'"[26] That same study asked: "What do you think should be the major change(s) in public relations education in the 1980's?"[27] In answer to that inquiry:

> Greater emphasis on business and research courses were again most frequently cited. . . [with] frequently voiced concern over the traditional affiliation of public relations education and journalism. Typical comments were: "Separate PR from mass communication," "move PR to college of business," "put sequence in business school or school of its own," "less journalism," "less emphasis on newspaper journalism," "less journalism skills and more management skills," and "make PR a first-line profession, not an afterthought of journalism."

Those exemplary, farsighted institutions who respond to the "PESCE" trends and their implications for public relations education can expect to produce "young practitioners with true public relations training . . . [who will rise] to vice president, executive director or assistant administrator positions." Those who cling to a traditional publicity focus can expect to produce ". . . journalists-in-

residence, which is what they'll remain."[28] A blend of perspectives from numerous disciplines including, but not restricted to, journalism are necessary in order to effectively meet the demands of the PR profession in the coming decade.

As Frank Wylie, Public Affairs Director for California State University at Los Angeles, queried, "Will the dog learn new tricks, or will the tail wag the dog?"[29] Will public relations degree programs leave the nest, or will journalism continue to rule the roost? There are no easy answers, but the issue must be addressed.

Kalupa and Allen offered insight to the dilemma via a General Systems Theory (GST) perspective, making the point that public relations sequences are frequently subsystems of the suprasystem of journalism. Therefore, public relations is forced to play "Mother may I" regarding each and every proposed curriculum change from degree requirements controlled by the suprasystem disciplines. Conflicts are almost inevitable:[30]

> The relationship between public relations sequences (subsystems) and journalism schools and colleges (suprasystems) could approach a state of conflict in a struggle over curricular revision. The subsystem, public relations, is experiencing a period of rapid growth and change. In many instances, public relations majors far outnumber the journalism or news sequence students [Paul Peterson. "Enrollments are Higher -- But How Much Higher?" Journalism Educator, January, 1981, pp. 3-9] The potentially unstable situation thus exists where the subsystem is the largest within the suprasystem.

Wylie carried this thought further, warning that:[31]

> . . . journalism schools should realize that the public relations and advertising faculty are the key to student volume and that these faculty members can choose among several options: (1) create a separate department; (2) align with another discipline such as speech or business; or (3) take over the department -- as they already have in some universities.

This is not a unique concept in the literature. The "PESCE" trends discussed earlier lead logically to the conclusion that, as Edward Bernays has long contended, public relations education should liberate itself from its supra-systems.[32] Cantor noted that ". . . we are seeing public relations education shift gradually from journalism schools to business schools, an essential move if public relations professionals are to be in a position to counsel top management."[33]

Cantor's comment gains significance since advertising curricula have traditionally been housed in the marketing sequences of business schools. A true merger of public relations sequences and advertising programs, as indicated by the literature already reviewed, helps assure program viability and graduate employability. It should be noted, however, that public relations need not necessarily move into business departments in order to accomplish its goals. As Haynes said:[34]

> Placement of the public relations curriculum within an academic institution depends upon: (1) The orientation of the individual curriculum; (2) The quality and experience of the instructors in each curriculum and (3) The level of cooperation

and exchange between departments, schools and colleges within the university.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations, based upon the literature reviewed, are offered as important to the development of effective public relations degree programs:

1) Careful and continual evaluation of the political/economic/social/cultural environment ("PESCE") relevant to the public relations field, such as those reviewed herein.

2) Monitoring of the effects of "PESCE" upon organizational developments influencing the practice of public relations.

3) Curricular evaluation and adaptation based upon relevant trends and issues in the field. Specifically, public relations education for the 80's and beyond should:

a) respond to increased corporate demand for public relations practitioners;

b) incorporate theoretical and technological advancements in the field of communication;

c) prepare students for the broadening scope (nationally and internationally) of public relations;

d) require courses equipping students as generalists to function in such areas as: issues identification, planning, management, and evaluation, human relations, employee rela-

tions, consumer relations, investor relations, media relations, government regulation, business management, research , issue and conflict resolution, marketing, lobbying, speech writing, fund raising, graphics, etcetera;

f) determine specific needs of the public relations field in local service areas in order to better serve their educational markets.

4) Blending of journalism, speech communication, business, and other relevant orientations in public relations courses and programs to reflect the historical shift of PR occupations from publicity specialists to public relations generalists.

5) Integration of advertising as fundamentally vital to academic preparation in public relations.

6) Titling of degree programs to stress the generalist nature of the field, allowing public relations education to stand on its own as a separate and unique entity, rather than as a subcategory of journalism or other umbrella degrees.

NOTES

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18 Larry Marshall. "The New Breed of Public Relations Executive." Public Relations Journal, July, 1980, p. 12.

19 Center, p. 18.

20 Marshall, p. 12.

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26 Kalupa and Allen, p. 35.

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28 Patrick Jackson, APR. "Journalist's Mindset Not Enough in Not-for-Profit Positions." In "Is Education Keeping Pace with Demands of the Profession?", p. 20.

29 Frank Wylie, APR. "Public Relations Education Should Demand Quality Accommodation within Journalism." In "Is Education Keeping Pace with Demands of the Profession?", p. 21.

30 Kalupa and Allen, p. 41, 42.

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34 Haynes, p. 21.